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By VICKI ROCK, Daily American Staff Writer

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U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, Gov. Ed Rendell, U.S. Sen. Bob Casey and U.S. Reps. John Murtha and Bill Shuster will lead the groundbreaking ceremony for the Flight 93 National Memorial at noon Nov. 7.

U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter and Rendell were in Somerset on Feb. 20 to sign a letter of commitment to building the first phase of the memorial by the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Salazar and Specter then came to Somerset on June 5 to meet with landowners so the needed property could be purchased without using eminent domain. Salazar returned several times and a team from the Department of the Interior met with property owners. The added effort worked as the land was purchased, except for one property. Svonavec Inc. and the National Park Service had agreed earlier that the value of the company's land will be determined in federal court.

First responders, members of the Families of Flight 93 and officials representing the National Park Service, the National Park Foundation, the Flight 93 Advisory Commission and the Flight 93 Memorial Task Force will participate in the groundbreaking. Young relatives of those aboard Flight 93 will be among those who will use shovels to turn the earth.

"It's been a long time in coming on the one hand — on the other, it's amazing how much work has been done," Gordon Felt, president of the Families of Flight 93, said in a telephone interview. "This is a wonderful culmination of the work done by the local community, the federal government and the memorial partners. This groundbreaking will mark a critical step in fulfilling the sacred promise we made to build an inspiring permanent Flight 93 National Memorial that honors our loved ones and that will educate generations about their heroic actions."

It is believed that Flight 93 was to crash into either the U.S. Capitol or the White House. It was the actions of those on the plane that caused it to instead crash on land in Stonycreek Township, near Shanksville. It was the only hijacked flight that day that did not reach its intended target.

"The fields of western Pennsylvania are hallowed ground for a nation that is eternally grateful to the heroes of Flight 93," Salazar said in an e-mail.

Shuster echoed his comments.

"Since the tragic events of Sept. 11, it has been a priority to complete a permanent national memorial to honor the sacrifice of the passengers and crew of Flight 93 by the 10th anniversary of the attacks," he said. "For the past eight years, I have worked with my colleagues from Pennsylvania, the Families of Flight 93 and the National Park Service to secure the land and funding necessary for the memorial to take shape. The groundbreaking will be an important milestone for everyone involved in the memorial and proves what can happen when people come together united under a common purpose."

Patrick White, vice president of the Families of Flight 93, said he wants to acknowledge the work of everyone involved, especially Salazar and the senators from Pennsylvania.

"We thank them for their help in securing the land to allow us to turn earth and to stay on the timeline that we all committed to back in February," he said.

John Reynolds, chairman of the Flight 93 Advisory Commission, said that meeting this milestone will give renewed momentum to the mission of creating a fitting national memorial to the 40 passengers and crew who lost their lives in freedom's name.

"Achieving this milestone will reflect the steady progress that we have made and must keep making, so that we meet the goal of dedicating the Flight 93 National Memorial by Sept. 11, 2011," said Jerry Spangler, co-chairman of the Flight 93 Memorial Task Force.

Murtha said the groundbreaking has been a long time coming.

“I’d like to thank the National Park Service, the Families of Flight 93 and most of all the people of Somerset County for their patience and support in moving this memorial forward,” Murtha said. “We’ve all worked together to get to this point, and I look forward to opening the first phase of the memorial less than two years from now.”

Felt said he doesn’t want people to forget that this is just the beginning. The first part of the memorial is to be dedicated on the 10th anniversary. Money still has to be raised for the completion of the memorial.

“This is one exciting step in the process,” he said.